



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sleeping Bear Dunes
National Lakeshore

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Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore News Release

February 10, 2006

For Immediate Release

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NO EVIDENCE OF COUGARS FOUND BY RESEARCHERS AT SLEEPING BEAR DUNES NATIONAL LAKESHORE

The presence of cougars (*Puma concolor*) in Michigan has been debated for decades.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently lists the eastern cougar subspecies as endangered and presumed extinct in the wild. However, many people claim to have seen the elusive animal. After receiving numerous such reports from the public, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore took a precautionary approach in autumn of 2003. With an emphasis on public safety, park rangers placed signs at all trailheads (excluding the Manitou Islands) alerting visitors that observations of cougars had been reported and how to respond to a cougar encounter.

From November 2004 through April 2005, the National Park Service (NPS) conducted a study throughout the mainland portion of the Lakeshore, with a goal of collecting evidence of cougar presence. Roads and trails are numerous on the mainland, with a total combined length of about 150 miles, crossing through all major habitat types. The study utilized three methods to attempt to document cougar presence: remote motion sensing camera systems; track surveys; and investigations of reported observations of cougars or their sign. These methods have been used in numerous studies elsewhere in assessing cougar presence.

NPS biologists, staff and volunteers collaborated on the effort. Seven remote sensing camera systems were placed based on reported observations of cougars, evidence of white-tailed deer activity, and in relationship to natural travel corridors. Greater effort was expended in Benzie County because the majority of the cougar sightings had been reported there. The cameras were set up at 30 different locations over the six-month period. To attract the cats, recently road-killed deer carcasses were wired to the base of a tree, the area scented with cougar urine, skunk essence, and/or catnip oil, and a motion-sensing camera attached to a tree 15-30 feet from the bait. Although cameras were operational for 863 total nights, not a single image of a cougar was obtained. Many other animals were documented, including bobcat, coyote, red fox, domestic dog, house cat, raccoon, deer, several bird species, and red squirrel. A total of 225 animal images were recorded.



Snow track surveys were conducted monthly from January-March 2005 with trails surveyed on foot and unplowed roads via snowmobile. Because deer typically move into the beach dune/pine forest interface during spring, track surveys were also completed in that habitat in April. All discernible tracks were identified to the species level. If tracks with the potential to be cougar were encountered, the tracks were forward and backward tracked to attempt to locate additional sign (e.g., scat, hair) that could be identified using DNA. Over 304 miles of road and trails were surveyed, and nearly 460 carnivore tracks were found and identified including 22 bobcat, 300 coyote, and 40 red fox. In addition to the species found by the camera survey, striped skunk, river otter, mink, and weasel tracks were identified.

During the course of the study, five sightings of cougars or their tracks were investigated, all within 24 hours of their being reported. The observation sites and surrounding areas were thoroughly searched, typically by two observers. No cougar sign was found at any of these reported sighting areas. Bobcat tracks were found at one location, coyote tracks at another, and bobcat and coyote tracks were noted at the other two locations. The fifth reported set of cougar tracks had been made by a domestic dog.

After six months of intensive study, staff at the Lakeshore did not find any physical evidence to support the reported presence of cougars in the park. Park biologists continue to maintain a database of reported cougar sightings and investigate them as quickly as possible. During the summer and fall of 2005, 15 cougar sightings were reported within the Lakeshore. A remote sensing camera was placed in the general area of several of the sightings to no avail. Additional funding has been requested to conduct a more intensive summer survey for cougars. Sightings, questions or concerns can be sent electronic mail to Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore at www.nps.gov/slbe and click on the "Contact Us" or call park headquarters at 231-326-5134.

(NOTE: Photo attached)



Figure 1: A SBDNL motion sensing camera caught this raccoon being treed by three bobcats during the spring of 2005. (NPS Photo)

- NPS/SLBE -